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Kentucky in the 1880s: An Exploration in Historical Demography*

Thomas R. Ford

The early years of a decade are frustrating for social demographers like myself who are concerned with the social causes and consequences of population changes. Social data from the most recent census have generally not yet become available for analysis while those from the previous census are too dated to be of current interest and too recent to have acquired historical value. That is one of the reasons why, when faced with the necessity of preparing a scholarly lecture in my field, I chose to stray a bit and deal with a historical topic. A social demographic analysis of 1880 data appeared appropriate because that was the census year closest to the midpoint between our founding as a nation and the present time as well as being near our centennial year of 1876.

Apart from the inopportune timing of the 1980 census for purposes of my lecture, I had another reason for wishing to look at our population in the nineteenth century. During the course of analyzing the populations of a number of developing countries in recent years, I have often wondered how closely their demographic characteristics and processes resembled those of our own nation before we became so highly urbanized and industrialized. It seemed to me that Kentucky offered a suitable microcosm of a nineteenth century agrarian society in the early stages of industrialization, although I must confess it proved to be somewhat less advanced in this transition than I had anticipated.

For reasons that were largely fortuitous, the choice of 1880 proved to be particularly appropriate to my needs. As it turned out, for the first and only time in our history, the population center¹ of the United States was located in Kentucky in that year, approximately where the Greater Cincinnati Airport is at the present time. Of greater substantive importance, though, the 1880 census proved to be the most extensive ever taken, up to that time, in terms of information collected, and it was also probably the most complete in its coverage as well.

That period of our history from the Centennial Year through the 1880s was not one of our finest eras. It was, at least in spirit, an extension of the so-called "gilded age" of our national history when ostentatious displays of individual wealth and showy symbols of national progress and prosperity were used to conceal some serious social and economic flaws. The Centennial Exhibition held in Philadelphia in 1876 was perhaps more symbolic of the state of the union than was intended. Its spectacular exhibits of the products of America's burgeoning science, technology and industry were more than emblematic of national pride. They were intended in part to demonstrate to the world the superiority of a free enterprise system thriving within a representative democracy. Behind the glittering scenes, though, the free enterprise organizers of the exhibition were saved from an embarrassing bankruptcy only by an emergency loan of the federal government,² an early precedent to the Chrysler Corporation salvage operation.

Unfortunately, the flaws of the national economy were at least matched by those of the political system. The presidential election of 1876 was held shortly after revelations of unprecedented corruption in Congress and among members of President Grant's cabinet. Assisted by the presence of federal troops deployed in several key Southern states, the Republican Party demonstrated a remarkable ability to transform popular vote losses into electoral vote victories. Thus a little known Ohio governor, Rutherford B. Hayes, rather than the New York Democratic party leader Samuel J. Tilden, became president in 1877. Hayes quickly lost favor with the radical Republican wing and was replaced by James A. Garfield as the GOP candidate in 1880. Garfield defeated the Democratic candidate, General Winfield Scott Hancock, but the Democrats gained control of both houses of Congress. Only a few months after his inauguration in 1881, President Garfield was wounded by an assassin, an event recalled by the wounding of President Reagan. Had the medical services and facilities available to President Reagan been available to President Garfield, he, too, probably would have survived instead of dying two months later. As it was, the remainder of his term was served by Chester A. Arthur, who failed to win his own party's nomination for the presidency in 1884. Instead, the Republicans nominated James G. Blaine, who was defeated by Grover Cleveland, and the Democrats gained control of both the White House and Congress for the first time in a quarter of a century.

Kentucky may have lagged behind most of the nation in 1880 measured by its industrial and technological development, but in politics it was a trend setter. Kentucky Democrats, led by ex-Confederate soldiers, had gained political control of the state government almost immediately after the Civil War had ended. Despite the fact that three times as many Kentuckians had served with the Union Army as with the Confederates, the Democrats maintained their control of both the governor's office and the state legislature for nearly thirty years, including the decade of the eighties.

The post-Civil War years were truly "Decades of Discord," as Hambleton Tapp and James Klotter have subtitled their excellent history of Kentucky during the period 1865-1900. The discord was not simply political; it was also social, cultural and economic. All of these elements were present in the internecine struggles of the two leading factions of the Democratic party. The Bluegrass Bourbon Democrats were essentially agrarians, devoted to the entire set of social and cultural traditions rooted in the state's predominantly argicultural economy. The New Departure Democrats, led by Henry Watterson, the influential editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, strongly advocated industrial development and voiced relatively liberal social values that were more consistent with the desired growth and transformation of the state's economy. Because they had greater popular support, the more conservative views of the Bourbons generally prevailed, with highly significant social and economic consequences. Perhaps the most momentous effects stemmed from the low rates and yields of property taxes on which state and local finances were most dependent. The combination of low tax revenues and heavy expenditures voted by indulgent and incompetent state legislatures resulted in a heavy state debt by the time Dr. Luke Blackburn became governor in 1879. A dedicated reformer, Governor Blackburn denounced the state's deficient and inequitable tax system and its failure to support adequate legal, health, and educational institutions. He was especially appalled by the condition of the state's prisons, and when reforms to reduce prison crowding failed to be legislated fast enough to suit him, he began pardoning prisoners at an unprecedented rate. This added further fuel to the flames of discord and by the end of his term, according to his biographer, ". . . Blackburn was so unpopular with the press that few kind words could be found about him."³

Although the cold statistics of the census of 1880 could not capture the events and ideologies of the day, they did reflect some of their consequences as well as those of earlier decades. Before examining these it will be useful to review briefly the organization and operation of the census so that its results can be better appreciated.

Even though a national census had been taken every ten years since 1790, as mandated by the Constitution, no permanent office had ever been established either to conduct the census or to maintain census records. Instead, for each new census the president appointed a superintendent to organize and supervise the operation, usually just a year before the census was to be taken. Congress would then pass an authorizing act and provide an appropriation to cover expenses.

The superintendent appointed for the tenth census in 1880 was Francis Amasa Walker, who was in the middle of a brilliant career as a statistician, political economist, and educator. Ten years earlier Walker had also served as superintendent of the ninth census, a post to which he had been appointed when he was only twenty-nine years old and without any previous census experience. If he had had any idea of what he was getting into, Walker would almost certainly have declined the honor, for his ambitions were normally tempered by a keen intelligence. Appointed only shortly before the 1870 census was to be taken, though, the young Walker had no opportunity to correct fundamental flaws in the organization and operation of the enumeration process that had been built into it by the Census Act of 1850. The effects of these basic defects were exacerbated by the unstable social and political conditions of the period immediately after the end of the Civil War. As a consequence, the ninth census proved to be one of the worst ever taken, and Walker ended up as its scapegoat.

Walker's biographer, J.P. Munroe, suggested that his acceptance of the superintendency of the 1880 census was an effort to redeem his reputation following the vicious public criticism and personal humiliation he had suffered after the publication of the 1870 census results.⁴ Before accepting the post, though, Walker demanded the passage of a new census act, which he had personally drafted. The new act gave supervision of the canvassing operation to census office personnel rather than, as in the past, to U.S. marshals over

whom census officials had no authority. The new law also removed the power of the marshals to appoint the enumerators without the approval of or even consultation with the census office. Walker attributed the atrocious 1870 counts in many of the Southern states to "... the supposed necessity of appointing the assistant marshals wholly from the dominant political party, the members of which, in some sections, were drawn almost exclusively from the race largely emancipated by the effects of war."⁵

Despite the various improvements to census operations made by the new law, the tenth census quickly ran into other problems. Barely fourteen months before the census was to go into the field to count 50 million people, Congress still had appropriated no money to fund the operation, and there was no staff other than the secretary himself. Somehow Secretary Walker managed to organize a staff and begin canvassing in June of 1880. Just a year later, though, while clerks were still hand tallying the count (since mechanical tabulators had not yet been developed) the census office appropriation ran out. Congress did not get around to providing a new appropriation until January of 1882. However, Secretary Walker managed to keep the operation moving by persuading more than seven hundred employees to continue working without pay and with no guarantee that they would be paid retroactively when a new appropriation was made. He also advanced nearly \$5,000 out of his own pocket to cover essential expenses.⁶ It is hardly surprising, then, that when offered the presidency of M.I.T. in 1881, Walker did not have to be strongly pressured to accept the position. However, he did remain as an unpaid consultant to the census office until most of the results were published. That was quite a long time, because the results were issued in twenty-two volumes, the last of which was published in 1888. They presented information not just on population numbers and characteristics but also on vital statistics, social institutions, agriculture, and a variety of mining industries, manufacturing establishments and manufactured goods.

POPULATION GROWTH

When the census clerks were finally paid and had finished the initial population counts, the national population was found to total 50,155,783. This was 30 percent greater than the 1870 enumeration before that count was revised upward. Even after the

correction of the 1870 figure, the ten-year numerical gain—more than 10 million—was the greatest recorded in the nation's history to that time.

Kentucky's 1880 population count was 1,648,690. This was about 25 percent greater than the recorded 1870 population, which we know was low. But it was apparent that the Kentucky population was growing more slowly than the national population, and had been lagging since 1820. Indeed, the Kentucky decennial growth rate continued to be lower than that of the nation until the 1970-80 decade with the single exception of the 1930-40 depression period.

Because the 25 percent growth rate from 1870 to 1880 was inflated, it was necessary to correct the counts for both census years in order to get a better idea of the true growth rate. These corrections were made using procedures developed by Princeton University's Office of Population Research.⁷ These corrected figures indicated that the Kentucky white population in 1880 was probably about 6.5 percent greater than the census count while the comparable 1870 population was about 12 percent greater than the recorded figure. It was not possible to apply the Princeton procedure to the black population, because the technique requires more accurate age data than was available for that group. There is every indication, though, that the undercount of the black population in 1870 was proportionately even greater than that of the white population. The 1870 figures showed a 6 percent decline in the black population from 1860, while the white population had apparently grown about 20 percent during the same period. This seemed plausible at the time because it was known that many slaves and ex-slaves had left the state during and after the Civil War. The 1870 census evidence of a declining black population was also accepted as supporting the widespread belief in the South that ex-slaves could not survive under conditions of freedom.

This view was dealt a harsh blow by the census of 1880, which showed that the black population was 22 percent greater than the 1870 count, even though the heavy out-migration of Kentucky blacks had continued. By simple interpolation between the 1860 and 1880 enumerations, it would appear that the Kentucky black population had been undercounted by 14 or 15 percent in 1870. In any case, the apparent decline from 1860 to 1870 almost surely was the product of a faulty census.

If my estimates of Kentucky's total populations in 1870 and 1880

are reasonably correct, the overall gain was not 25 percent as officially recorded but somewhat closer to 19 percent. Considering the general magnitude of the errors we are dealing with, a difference of 6 percentage points in the growth rate may not appear to be of any great importance, but in this case it is. Given the prevailing rate of natural increase, a 25 percent gain in the state's population over the decade would have meant that the state was gaining some population through migration. On the other hand, a 19 percent gain would mean that the state was losing population through migration exchange. Under conditions of free migration, the relocation of people represents a social choice or, in the popular phrase, "people voting with their feet." It turns out to be much easier to explain why more people chose to leave Kentucky than to move into it between 1870 and 1880 than vice-versa.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS

Before discussing migration, it will be useful to examine the natural increase component of population growth, which is governed by the balance of births and deaths. The usual source of birth and death data is a vital statistics registration system, which in the United States is maintained by the counties and states but subsidized by the federal government. Although some cities had developed vital statistics registration systems in this country as early as the 1830s,⁸ there were still very few good state systems by 1880. Kentucky was the first state west of the Alleghenies to require the registration of births, deaths, and marriages with the passage in 1852 of the so-called "Sutton Law", named for the Georgetown physician, Dr. William L. Sutton, who was its chief promoter. Unfortunately, the Sutton Law was very cumbersome and depended on the voluntary compliance of physicians, coroners, undertakers and local public officials, so it was not very effective. It was later repealed, but the laws that succeeded it were not much more productive of good vital statistics, at least partly because the state was unwilling to pay for the service. The lack of incentive is evident in the report of a clerk in the state auditor's office, Mr. L. D. Holloway, who had the responsibility of compiling and aggregating the county registration reports. As a preface to his 1877 report he wrote:

The tabular statements of the information have been compiled

after months of constant labor by the clerk whose duty it was to perform this labor for the past three years, to-wit: 1874, 1875, and 1876, and he reports very little patience or eye-sight left him, and no disposition to continue these reports unless compensated for the three reports already made.⁹

The Kentucky experience with vital statistics registration was more or less typical of the states at this time, so it had been decided to use the census to collect information on births and deaths that had occurred during the year preceding the census. Data on deaths had been collected in this manner since 1850, but a question on births was not added until 1870. Neither set of data was of particularly good quality, as is evident from the evaluation of Dr. John Shaw Billings, the leading national authority on vital statistics at that time, who had been assigned to analyze the compilations. "If the value of the statistics of mortality in a census of the United States taken under existing laws depended upon the returns of substantially the whole body of deaths occurring during the year covered by the enumeration," Dr. Billings wrote, "the results would not be worth the space covered by publication, much less the expense of collection and compilation."¹⁰

His evaluation of the birth statistics was not much more complimentary, and he expressed the view that the rate of 31.4 births per 1,000 population derived from the 1880 reports was probably 20 percent too low. The Kentucky birth rate calculated from the 1880 census data was 34.9, or about 11 percent higher than the national rate. Judging from standard population models whose age distributions most closely resemble those of Kentucky's population in 1880,¹¹ though, the true birth rate was probably around 40 to 42. This is slightly higher than the rates found in most developing countries today and about two and a half times the present Kentucky birth rate. However, it was lower than it must have been a generation earlier to judge by the decrease in average size of Kentucky families from 5.8 in 1850 to 5.5 in 1880.

If Kentucky's birth rate in 1880 approximated those of developing countries today, its death rate did not. It was much higher, with the exception of some African countries. The rate derived from the deficient census statistics was 14 deaths per 1,000 population, but judging again from the appropriate population models, the true rate must have been about 20. This was approximately the rate recorded for 1880 by Massachusetts, which

had the best state vital statistics registration system in the country. The crude death rates of developing countries today are generally in the range of 11 to 13 per 1,000 population, reflecting the availability of better health and medical services than even the most advanced countries had a century ago.

Perhaps the best statistical indicator of health and medical advances is the decline in infant mortality. The 1880 census figures showed that in Kentucky there were 103 deaths of children under one year for every 1,000 recorded births. This rate was undoubtedly too low because infant deaths are even more likely to go unreported than births. Massachusetts, with its relatively good registration system, had reported 170 infant deaths per 1,000 births in 1880, while Louisville registered a rate of 222. Quite likely the Louisville rate was higher than that of the rest of the state because at that time cities generally had higher death rates than rural areas. Louisville also had a larger population of black residents, and death rates for that group were then running a third to a half greater than those of the white population. A reasonable estimate of the state rate in 1880 would be in the range of 150 to 180. This is more than ten times the current infant mortality rate in Kentucky and some three times greater than we now find in developing countries such as Mexico whose birth rates are comparable with those of Kentucky a century ago.

MIGRATION

If my estimates of a birth rate of about 40 per 1,000 and a death rate of about 20 per 1,000 are correct, the natural increase of Kentucky's population would have been about 2 percent per year. Compounded over the ten year period from 1870 to 1880, this rate would have given an expected increase of about 22 percent. If my estimate of 19 percent as the actual increase is also correct, then Kentucky must have lost about 3 percent of its 1870 population through migration. A net migration loss would not have been a new experience for the state. To judge by overall growth rates it must have been sustaining such losses during every decade since 1820 with the exception of the 1840s. As we know now, the trend of net losses continued unbroken until the 1970-80 decade, when Kentucky recorded its first intercensal net migration gain in 130 years.

The census did not collect information on residential moves in

1880 as it does now, so most of our knowledge about interstate migration must be inferred from state-of-birth data. In 1880 about 454,000 native Kentuckians were counted as residents of other states, which was about 51,000 more than had been counted in 1870. During the same period, the number of natives of other states who were living in Kentucky had grown from 176,500 to about 187,000, an increase of only 10,500. This growing difference in the size of the two migrant groups provides further evidence that the state was experiencing a net migration loss.

The state-of-birth data also provide the best information available on the direction of migration streams at that time. Excluding foreign immigrants, 80 percent of Kentucky's residents in 1880 who had been born elsewhere came from just five states: Tennessee, Virginia, Ohio, Indiana and North Carolina in order of size of contribution. Of the 454,000 Kentuckians who had moved to other states, nearly three-fourths were located in the states of Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, Texas, Kansas, and Ohio. The general movement, which was typical of the country at that time, was westward. The northern industrial cities, even though they were beginning to grow rapidly, were not yet attracting Kentuckians in large numbers. For migrating Kentuckians the main attractions lay in the west: land, adventure, and for many, perhaps, a dream of wealth that was not likely to be acquired at home.

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION WITHIN KENTUCKY

Although we have no data specifically relating to population movements within Kentucky, we can gain some idea of the shifts by comparing growth rates of different residential areas. Kentucky's population in 1880 was highly rural. About 85 percent of the population lived in places with fewer than 2,500 residents, and this proportion had changed very little from what it was in 1870. There were, in fact, only 17 places in the state that had 2,500 or more residents. Louisville with a population of 124,000 was by far the largest. Indeed, it was the sixteenth largest city in the nation, but had fallen from its rank of twelfth largest in 1850. Only three other Kentucky cities had more than 10,000 residents: Covington (30,000), Newport (20,000) and Lexington (17,000). Many of the urban places were growing so slowly that we must infer they were losing population through migration exchange. These included Bowling Green, Lexington, Maysville, Paducah, and probably

Louisville, whose population increased only 22 percent between 1870 and 1880 according to the official counts. This slow rate of urban growth, which was only about 70 percent of the national rate, is indicative of the lagging industrial and commercial development of the state.

The agricultural areas of the state were not growing very rapidly either. The areas of most rapid growth were eastern Kentucky, where farming was mostly of the subsistence variety, and the western coal fields, where mining was just beginning to develop. In both the inner and outer Bluegrass areas, considered to be some of the best farming land in the state, many counties were growing so slowly that they had to be sustaining net migration losses. For example, the Fayette county population grew only 9 percent during the 1870-80 decade, which was less than half the state growth rate; and Lexington's population increased by only 12.5 percent.

AGE AND SEX COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION

Social and economic factors influence not only the growth and distribution of population but also its age-sex composition, which is usually depicted by the familiar age-sex pyramid. The pyramid of Kentucky's population in 1880 had the typically broad base and steeply sloping sides characteristic of agrarian societies with very high birth and death rates. The median age of the population was only 18 years, compared with about 30 years today. Only 10 percent of Kentucky's population a century ago was 50 years old or over, which is smaller than the proportion 65 and older today.

The most surprising trait of the 1880 age-sex composition was the absence of a feature that I had fully expected to find. The Civil War had ended only fifteen years earlier, and Kentucky, which had contributed troops to both sides, was reported to have suffered especially severe losses. Most of the books and articles that deal with the subject point out that accurate records of casualties are lacking. However, many report an estimated figure of 30,000 as the combined losses from both sides. So far as I have been able to determine, this often-repeated figure seems to have originated in Nathaniel Shaler's history, *Kentucky: A Pioneer Commonwealth*, published in 1885, in which he estimated some ten thousand deaths from war wounds and a loss of "not less than twenty thousand by unreported disease."¹²

The effects of a major war are typically and indelibly etched in

the composition of a population through reductions in the number of males of military age and appreciable gaps in the cohorts of children born during the war years. Considering that 30,000 deaths represented at least 10 percent of the Kentucky male population eligible for military service during the Civil War and 25 to 30 percent of the number that actually did serve, I fully anticipated finding the characteristic stamp of the war's effects in the 1880 population. To my considerable surprise, I did not find an appreciable deficit of males who would have been of military age during the war. Indeed, the uncorrected 1880 census counts showed that the native white population aged 35-45 (who would have been 20-39 in 1865) included 650 *more* males than females. After adjusting the counts for underenumeration and age heaping, I estimated that there was a deficit of about 7,300 males in the military age groups. It must be remembered, though, that male mortality rates are normally higher even without a war, and males were also more likely to have migrated to other states. These two phenomena would appear to account for all but four or five thousand of the observed shortage of native white males, who made up the bulk of Kentucky's military contributions. There may have been some more losses among black and foreign-born troops, but scarcely enough to bring the total figure even close to the legendary 30,000.

The expected shortage of births during the years 1863 to 1866 was evident in the population aged 13-17 in 1880. Again with corrections for underenumeration and age distortion, the deficit appeared to be about 8,700. By applying appropriate life table survival ratios to this group, it was calculated that the war was probably responsible for the non-occurrence of some 12,000 Kentucky births. This sizable deficit, which would appear to be considerably greater than the actual number of war deaths, was apparently never called to public attention if it was noticed at all.

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

It is not possible to discuss here all of the numerous social and demographic characteristics presented in the extensive 1880 census volumes, but a few attributes of the Kentucky population merit special attention.

First, with respect to racial composition, it has already been noted that Kentucky's black population was increasing, despite the

misleading count in 1870, and in 1880 numbered approximately 271,500. As a proportion of the total state population, however, the black component was steadily declining. In 1850 blacks made up 22.5 percent of the total; by 1880 they had declined to 16.5 percent. This trend has continued until the present, so that in 1980 the black proportion was slightly more than 7 percent.

The mistaken but widespread belief that the number of blacks was declining in Kentucky prior to 1880 was lent support by their migration from many rural areas into a relatively small number of cities. By 1880 there were more than 20,000 blacks in Louisville, 7,600 in Lexington, and 3,200 in Frankfort. Even so, the vast majority—some 82 percent—still lived in rural places.

The one segment of Kentucky's population that was highly urbanized was the foreign-born, of whom two-thirds lived in towns and cities. About three-fourths of the foreign-born, who numbered approximately 59,500, lived in just half a dozen cities. With the exception of Lexington and Frankfort, these cities were located along the Ohio River. Louisville, with a foreign-born population of about 26,000, contained more than two-fifths of the total group. Slightly more than half of Kentucky's foreign-born population came from Germany, while nearly a third was from Ireland, and the third largest group, about 9 percent, came from England, Scotland and Wales. Like many other states, Kentucky made a strenuous effort to attract immigrants, especially to rural areas, and even established a State Immigration Bureau in 1879 for this purpose. The recruitment efforts were not very successful though, and although a few immigrant colonies were established in some of our rural counties, the number and percentage of foreign-born Kentuckians continued to decline.

One of the reasons Kentucky was unable to attract more immigrants was that it could offer neither the industrial jobs of the northern cities nor the cheap and bountiful lands available in the more western states. Five out of eight employed Kentuckians in 1880 were farmers, while manufacturing, mining and construction industries combined employed less than one in eight. Only 9 percent of the female population in the working age group was gainfully employed, and over half of these were domestic servants. As yet women were not employed to any great extent in Kentucky manufacturing industries. In fact, the economic climate for such industries was far from salubrious, and fewer manufacturing establishments were counted in the census of 1880 than had been

recorded in 1870. This would appear to explain in part the earlier noted net migration losses sustained by most Kentucky cities.

In contrast to the number of manufacturing companies, the number of farms in Kentucky was increasing. The 166 thousand farms counted in 1880 was 83 percent greater than the number in 1860. The average farm size was just as steadily shrinking, though, and had decreased from 211 acres in 1860 to only 129 acres in 1880, a drop of almost 40 percent. The high birth rate of the farm population made for its rapid growth, despite the elevated death rate. It was obvious that the subdivision of the limited farm land which was responsible for the reduction in average farm size could not continue indefinitely. This meant that many of the children had to leave the farm as soon as they were grown, which contributed to the state's net migration losses.

One of the more serious consequences of the prevailing agrarian character of Kentucky's culture and economy was the inadequate financial support provided to its social institutions. Nowhere was this more evident than in the school system, which like most state and local institutions was largely financed by property taxes. Typically, Kentucky tax rates were low and applied to property valuations that were greatly under-assessed. The annual financial support for common schools in the state averaged only \$1.50 per pupil. Schools for black children were separately financed by taxes on property owned by blacks, and per pupil expenditures came to only 50 cents per year. Even though teachers, at least white teachers, received a generous salary of \$26 a month on the average while school was in session, most districts could not afford to operate their schools for more than five months a year. Consequently, the average annual salary for white teachers was only \$133, and for black teachers a meager \$50.

School attendance was not compulsory, and average daily attendance was only about 55 percent for white students and 31 percent for black children. Given these circumstances, the illiteracy figure of 22 percent for the white population ten years old and over reported in the 1880 census appears conservative. Seventy percent of the comparable black population was reported as illiterate. In contrast, the illiteracy rate for the foreign-born population was only 10 percent.

A summary analysis of the great abundance of social and economic data on Kentucky's population in 1880 yields a profile that closely resembles those of the poorest developing countries

today. The agricultural economy was not able to meet the needs of a population with a high rate of natural increase, while domestic industry had not developed sufficiently to absorb the excess population. Hence the state was losing many of its native sons and daughters to other states and was unable to attract large numbers of immigrants, either native or foreign-born. And because the economy was not generating much income beyond that needed to support families at a subsistence level, local and state institutions were seriously underfinanced and in a deplorable condition—not just the schools but the hospitals, asylums, institutions for the deaf and blind, and prisons as well. The tragedy of the situation—and in this respect Kentucky of a century ago also resembled so many struggling Third World Countries today—is that the state possessed a wealth of resources but was unable or unwilling to develop them in a way that would yield significant benefits to the larger society. It is not too surprising, however, that when the retiring Governor Blackburn called attention to this unpopular truth at the state Democratic convention in 1883, he was roundly jeered by many of the delegates.¹³

CONCLUSION

Paradoxically, the comparison of Kentucky's social, economic, and demographic conditions of a century ago with those of today's developing countries offers more encouragement about the prospects of the latter than I would have expected. Without drawing any Panglossian inferences that today's is the best of all Kentuckys, I must conclude that the state is in far better condition than I would have predicted had I analyzed the 1880 census data when they first appeared. I am therefore somewhat heartened by the possibility that the depressing outlook for contemporary developing societies that I share with so many social demographers may prove unduly pessimistic.

A second conclusion I would draw from my analysis is neatly summarized in the title of a book written by Otto Ludwig Bettman: *The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible*. I would suggest that those who yearn nostalgically for a return to our agrarian past need to take a second look at the living conditions of that era. A century ago life expectancy at birth was only 40 years; today it is more than 70. Despite the underreporting of infant mortality, nearly 6,000 infant deaths were recorded in Kentucky in 1880—more than

eight times the annual number we have today with a larger number of births. At that time one out of every six Kentucky babies died before it was a year old compared with only one of eighty today. Because they were relatively large, most families probably experienced the tragedy of losing an infant or a young child. Diphtheria, whooping cough, scarlet fever and enteritis took hundreds of children's lives every year. Those who survived early childhood often fell victim to tuberculosis, or consumption as it was then generally called. In 1880 more than 3,700 deaths in the state were attributed to this disease, which is four times as many deaths as are attributable to automobile accidents in Kentucky at present. (In 1977, the latest data for which I have information, tuberculosis claimed only 79 lives in the state.) Epidemics of cholera, malaria and yellow fever, which have long since disappeared from the state, were still periodically causing thousands of deaths in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

By most indicators of social and economic well-being Kentucky still falls below national averages, but not nearly so far below as it did in 1880, when a fifth of the adult population was illiterate and per capita personal income was only 60 percent of the national per capita. (In 1978, Kentucky per capita income was 85 percent of the national figure.) Racial discrimination still persists in the state, but it is no mean achievement that the educational level of the black population has risen from only 30 percent literate a century ago to a median of nearly 12 years of schooling today. The black-white difference in educational achievement now stands at less than one year.

In evaluating living conditions over time we always run the risk of unfairly applying the standards of one age to the conditions of another. In a free society, though, people can apply their own standards in deciding where they want to live, and this we do know: in the ten years before 1880, more people chose to move out of the state than into it. During the decade of the 1970s, the reverse was true. I can only speculate, of course, but I believe that if people could move in time as they do in space, the migrant stream from the 1880s to the 1980s within Kentucky would be far broader and stronger than the counterstream. Based on my own vicarious experiences as a traveler in time, I have no difficulty in concluding that the 1880s may be an interesting time to visit, but I wouldn't want to live then.

NOTES

¹This article is based on the text of the Distinguished Professor Lecture delivered by Thomas R. Ford 15 April 1981 in the William A. Seay Auditorium of the University of Kentucky.

²The center of population is defined as the point at which an imaginary flat, weightless, and rigid map of the United States would balance if weights of identical value were placed on it so that each weight represented the location of one person as of the census date.

³Edwin E. Sparks, *National Development, 1877-1885* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), pp. 7-9.

⁴Nancy Disher Baird, *Luke Pryor Blackburn, Physician, Governor, Reformer* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), p. 113.

⁵James P. Munroe, *A Life of Francis Amasa Walker* (New York: H. Holt, 1923).

⁶Appendix C., "Documents Relating to the Taking of the Census of South Carolina," in *Compendium of the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880)*, Revised edition, Part I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), p. lx.

⁷Appendix B., "Reports of the Superintendent of the Census to the Secretary of the Interior," in *Compendium of the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880)*, Revised edition, Part I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885).

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